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AUTHOR Seidel, Julie
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ABSTRACT

The process of questioning and its relationship to researching, problem solving, and experimentation are central to visual arts education policy in Queensland, Australia. Students are introduced to the world of visual arts within the context of the late 20th century, diversity, and postmodernism. This challenges students as it demands awareness and an embrace of the questioning process. This paper summarizes findings of a case study that examined the phenomenon of questioning as it occurs during the daily exchanges, situations, and experiences of students. The case study focused on a small group of Hong Kong Chinese students who shared a similar (Confucian) heritage and were receiving their education in Australia. This facilitated focusing on issues relating to cultural diversity and the many faces of learning, understanding, and practice, as pursued in the research of Gardner (1989), and Biggs (1990, 1994, 1996). Questioning is defined for the purposes of this study as a mode of inquiry which ultimately builds a person's "sense of truth," "personal reality," and cultural understanding. The findings indicate that the monitoring and facilitating of questioning is a delicate process; perceptions of questioning represent a complex and confronting process for all individuals; questioning demands continual renegotiation of naturalistic generalizations; an awareness of the questioning process is often highlighted through experiences associated with cross-cultural transitions; and questioning is perceived by these students to be significantly purpose-driven, with an emphasis on outcomes rather than process. (BT)

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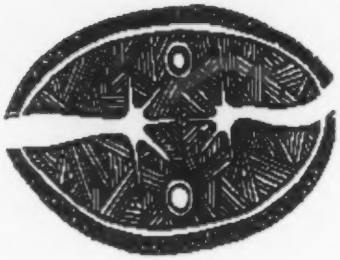

InSEA

"The Phenomenon of Questioning as Perceived by Visual Arts Students"

by

Julie Seidel
St. Peters Lutheran College
Indooroopilly
Brisbane, Australia

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THE PHENOMENON OF QUESTIONING AS PERCEIVED BY VISUAL ARTS STUDENTS.

Julie Seidel, St Peters Lutheran College, Indooroopilly, Brisbane, Australia.

The process of questioning and its relationship to researching, problem solving and experimentation are central to visual arts education policy in Queensland, Australia. Students are introduced to the world of visual arts within the context of the late 20th century, diversity and post-modernism. This challenges students as it demands awareness and an embracing of the questioning process. A willingness to delve into issues which challenge, shape and clarify who we are, forming our individual personal realities, should be nurtured within the classroom. The mechanisms employed to encourage the embracing of questioning include the student-teacher relationship, communication skills and acknowledgment of environmental and cultural context.

This paper briefly introduces and summarises the findings of a case study entitled 'The phenomenon of questioning as perceived by visual arts students'. The formalised framework of case study provided a researcher/participant perspective which assisted in identifying the personal perceptions of students in relation to questioning.

The phenomenon of questioning as it occurs within the daily exchanges, situations and experiences of students was the key focus of the study. Reflecting the Congress theme, 'Cultures and Transitions' the case study selectively focused on a small group of students who shared a similar (Confucian) heritage and were receiving their education in Australia. This facilitated a focus on issues relating to cultural diversity and the many faces of learning, understanding and practice, as pursued in the research of Gardner (1989), Biggs (1990), (1994), (1996).

The objective was to review the shaping of identity within the Asia-Pacific region through observation, reflection and 'questioning'. Within the Australian visual arts classroom, it is consequently proposed that by encountering a specific perspective, one redefines or negotiates their own understanding, interpretations and context through comparison and contrast, thus equipping students with attitudes and approaches that assist in negotiating diversity.

Investigating the mechanism of questioning and its many forms is by nature a reflective and interactive process that contributes to the development of unique teaching and learning relationships. The embracing of a questioning approach to all areas of life facilitates a collaborative, sensitive and meaningful approach to diversity. This benefits all involved and should represent a significant component of visual arts curricula.

The visual arts by its very nature is in a constant state of change and consequently challenges individuals. It draws on existing knowledge and truths, shapes and reshapes ones cultural orientation and continually redefines experiences that form what is considered to be ones' 'personal reality'.

When considering how visual arts students perceive questioning specifically from a Confucian heritage context, it is necessary to step outside of one's personal context. Investigating questioning from this position forms a cycle which clearly illustrates the relationship between questioning and diversity as opposed to questioning and a definitive solution. Van Manen (1990) calls this 'opening minds and possibilities'.

The findings reported in this paper are based on case study material derived from students that I have worked with in the school context as a teacher. It is important to note that any study of diversity must begin with the individual. An interactive environment and events encountered during the study provided fertile ground from which student responses and personal realities were identified and discussed. The information provided in this summary primarily assists in identifying how one might encounter diversity in the classroom. It is not the intention of this research to make all students the same or manipulate their personal interpretations.

Questioning is defined for the purposes of this study as a mode of inquiry which ultimately builds one's 'sense of truth', 'personal reality' and cultural understanding. Opportunities to embrace questioning are often determined by classroom participation and contextual and environmental influences. Stereotypes, assumptions and expectations based on ethnicity, interaction or previous experiences provide a starting point for a questioning approach regardless of their validity.

For example, it is sometimes assumed that a student communicating in English, which may be their third language, is unable to grasp a specific concept if they lack the English skills to articulate their level of understanding. A questioning approach by both student and teacher may result in a more relevant or meaningful level of understanding through, for example, the making of art that is personal and culturally reflective. Issues such as the spontaneous nature of the classroom and the emphasis on social skills within the peer group can strongly influence teacher interpretations and observations concerning student perceptions of questioning. It is the intention of this paper that the findings presented raise awareness concerning the mechanisms and perceptions of questioning for individuals.

The Relevance of Questioning

Prior to considering how students do experience and perceive questioning it is pertinent to ask why we should investigate such phenomena.

Gardner (1989) provides a strong directive for any study that focuses on 'the rhetorical exercise of questioning' through his descriptions of experiences in the Chinese context. He cites many examples of misunderstanding or misguided assumptions due to contextual differences. Biggs (1994, 1996) provides studies of Hong Kong Chinese students and their approach to learning which identify issues that challenge concepts such as 'absolute truth' and what students consider to be valuable outcomes. Clear examples of a questioning approach in student attitudes to learning are found within these studies. The style of questioning employed and observed in some instances does not always sit well with the established norms of the Australian classroom. This point is further developed in the study findings which discuss and identify particular behaviours which are part of a questioning approach. These can be linked to influences such as ethnicity.

The intention of a questioning approach is not to reach universal conformity but to arrive at 'sensitive' understanding through a more inclusive, interactive, collaborative and interdisciplinary approach as endorsed by this Congress. Sensitivity should be reflected through a constant review of pedagogy and how we arrive at 'personal understanding' in the light of diversity.

Signposts

Some of the signposts observed when considering how students perceive questioning were the following modes of behaviour. These are noted primarily from the teacher's perspective:

Motivation:
A willingness to learn or achieve is sometimes measured through classroom interaction. Teachers may be aware that 'saving face' behaviour represents a cultural influence for these students when dealing with student motivation. However, a simplistic understanding of such contextual influences is dangerous, as it ignores the individual in favour of the stereotype. It may be, for instance, that the student is introverted by nature.

Participation:
Withdrawal from classroom activity may be easily equated with a lack of willingness to question. Contextually, such behaviour may provide a safety valve for the student in response to expectations, an inability to feel comfortable in the public arena, or a preference for personal assistance.

Judgements:
Obvious areas that inform the judgements of teachers include language ability, withdrawal of participation, and proactive behaviours such as seeking personal assistance in the form of extensive tutoring. Equating questioning and the quality of learning with confidence, interaction and independence sometimes occurs if references to context are not considered.

Critical reflection with reference to any of these behaviours suggests a starting point for questioning. Despite the complexity of such signposts, it is beneficial that this information may facilitate further understanding for students and teachers. This process clearly reflects the framework of learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be, as adopted in the principal theme of the Congress.

Key Observations

The observations presented here were specific to the Hong Kong Chinese students in my classroom. These tied in closely with the characteristics previously identified by Biggs and Gardner. Observations concerning the demands placed on the student-teacher relationship represent only one of many issues experienced by Australian teachers. The observations are summarised as:

- Demanding personal assistance outside of the classroom rather than within the 'public' realm of the classroom.
- Lack of communication or inquiry when unsure of what to do. When students don't understand they find it difficult to initiate questions or approach the teacher out of respect.
- 'Cue-seeking' behaviour which attracts a cautionary response from teachers due to, for example, its rote-learning implications (Biggs, 1996). This approach can present teachers with ethical issues in relation to test content or situations where process is paramount.

Many of these behaviours are not generally considered to be indicative of an independent or 'questioning' learning approach. Further consideration of these observations revealed the possibility that questioning takes on many forms and that perceptions of questioning reflect personal realities. The aforementioned behaviours did assist as a starting point in developing rapport, communication and some understanding of the cultural and environmental influences which influence students. In this context questioning includes a more private and personal reflection undertaken with reference to personal context.

The Research Perspective and its Implications for Teachers.

Student perceptions of questioning are as diverse as the concept of personal realities and daily experiences. A summary of student perceptions may lead to generalisations and stereotypes. However, reflection is always a positive process within the spirit of questioning. The signposts and observations offered here acknowledge and support diversity as a valued aspect of reality.

It can therefore be concluded that:

- A questioning approach results in perceptions of reality that become 'multi' rather than singular. This results in students analysing influences of an environmental and cultural nature. Students who have found themselves working in a new cultural context will have experienced this concept even if they are unable to formulate and clearly articulate verbal questions.
- Valuing questioning and focusing on its potential as a learning approach assists students with the development of meaningful perceptions.

- Experience is important. Knowing the student provides opportunities to analyse, reflect and critique. How these experiences are interpreted within the classroom is a matter of pedagogy and reflection on one's personal understanding of diverse realities.

Student perceptions are therefore shaped through experiences, a focus on meaning and acceptance of the multi-dimensional nature of reality. The implementation of management strategies which balance the needs of the individual and equity issues across the group are an essential component of this process. For teachers, this opens up issues such as 'knowing' the student and the dialogue relationship. The visual arts is an area where communication through the 'making' of visual statements empowers individuals to reflect upon their personal identity.

Key Findings

When investigating how students perceive the phenomenon of questioning the process of inquiry allows the participants and researcher to become the question. Van Manen (1990) adds dimension to this process by noting that a phenomenological stance is that which explores 'what something is really like' (p.42).

The interpretations and experiences of students provided some insight into their personal perceptions of the questioning process. The findings presented form inter-related themes which reflect the multi-dimensional nature of perceptions.

In summary, the findings indicate that:

The monitoring and facilitating of questioning is a delicate process.

There are a range of equity and ethical issues that come into play when considering individual perceptions, communication skills, and observations regarding questioning. For some students, it is particularly difficult to move into a field where the single answer is not the goal. In the classroom responses and recollections are an invaluable part of a students awareness, development, learning and trust. An awareness which facilitates reflection results in the formulation of that which is contextually appropriate.

Perceptions of questioning represent a complex and confronting process for all individuals.

Stereotypes provide a type of summary that reflects what may be generally considered as "truth". Whilst a valuable marker of attitude and understanding, stereotypes should be reviewed within the larger framework of context, with an open mind toward change and development. The value of stereotypes which influence the perceptions of individuals is introduced by Singh (1996). This aspect of a questioning approach requires sensitivity and respect for diversity. The concept of changing or challenging 'truth' within the context of the classroom requires careful consideration by all teachers.

Questioning demands continual renegotiation of naturalistic generalisations.

Individuals play an important role in the formation of generalisations which tend to summarise the group environment. Contextual influences are framed by the aforementioned signposts. Renegotiation requires a questioning approach. Students may perceive this activity in relation to cultural influences, while teachers may bring different interpretations to the questioning behaviour as a result of natural generalisations. Generalisation, therefore plays and important role in the questioning process, as it provides pivotal points for inquiry. The reconstructions of knowledge and 'truth' are accommodated through a sensitive attitude towards diversity.

An awareness of the questioning process is often heightened through the experiences associated with cross-cultural transitions.

Students may be very competent at handling major contextual changes between home, school and their peers. For example, the apprentice-master relationship that is part of traditional Confucian based cultures may be highly influential in how students behave in the Australian

classroom. A questioning approach does empower these students to deal with the inevitable 'blending' that results from diverse cultural experiences.

Questioning is perceived by the students represented in the study to be significantly purpose-driven, with an emphasis on outcomes rather than process.

Forms of questioning are constantly reviewed and redefined depending on the desired outcomes. The purposes and function of questioning proved as diverse as the individuals studied. However, all students shared a rigorous approach to questioning at a 'surface level'. Some students, for example, perceived questioning to be a pathway to completing a project rather than gaining understanding along the way. Pleasing the teacher or finding out exactly what the teacher required did open up dialogue, but did not always provide the conclusive response that students were seeking.

Conclusion

This study revealed that the process of questioning takes on many models. What may appear to be inequitable, inconvenient, habitual or inappropriate behaviour in one situation, may actually be acceptable in another context.

Questioning is consequently embraced by those who are willing to be honest, candid and informed. They are able to identify their 'personal reality' while remaining 'aware of the whole' (Van Manen, 1990).

Student perceptions of questioning are strongly influenced by their personal realities. The phenomenon of questioning empowers students to take the 'lived experience' and reflect upon diversity and the realities of others. Whether students value the enriching nature of the questioning process will depend on the willingness of the individual to encounter and investigate difference. The challenges and personal conflicts that may result from questioning demand a tolerant attitude toward contextual and environmental influences.

The Congress theme "cultures and traditions' embraces the phenomenology of questioning with an emphasis on the visual arts as a language that empowers individuals. Those who experience and acknowledge the relevance of a questioning approach are therefore 'the kind of being who is part of both change and consistency' (Beyer, 1996).

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